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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest examines how changing family patterns have affected the full-day/half-day kindergarten issue, discussing why schools are currently considering alternative scheduling and describing the advantages and disadvantages of each type of program. The following changing family patterns affecting the choice of full-day kindergarten programs are discussed briefly: (1) an increase in the number of working parents; (2) an increase in the number of children who have had preschool or day care experience; (3) an increase in the influence of television and family mobility on children; and (4) renewed interest in academic preparation for later school success. Some of the reasons affecting alternative scheduling for kindergarten are stated as state school funding formulas, busing and transportation costs, and availability of classroom space and teachers. It is concluded that while both full-day and half-day programs have advantages and disadvantages, the length of the school day is only one dimension of the kindergarten experience. As long as the curriculum is developmentally appropriate and intellectually stimulating, either type of scheduling can provide an adequate introduction to school. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

Full-Day or Half-Day Kindergarten?

According to educator Barry Herman (1984) and others, the majority of 5-year-olds in the United States today already are more accustomed to being away from home much of the day, more aware of the world around them, and more likely to spend a large part of the day with peers than were children of previous generations. These factors, plus the demonstrated ability of children to cope with a longer day away from home, have created a demand in many communities for full-day kindergarten programs.

This Digest examines how changing family patterns have affected the full-day/half-day kindergarten issue, discussing why schools are currently considering alternative scheduling and describing the advantages and disadvantages of each type of program.

Changes in Family Patterns

Among the changes occurring in American society that make full-day kindergarten attractive to families are

An increase in the number of working parents. As reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (Grant and Snyder 1983), the number of mothers of children under 6 who work outside the home increased 34 percent from 1970 to 1980. The National Commission on Working Women (1985) reports that, in 1984, 48 percent of children under 6 had mothers in the labor force.

An increase in the number of children who have had preschool or day care experience. Since the mid-1970s, the majority of children have had some kind of preschool experience, either in Head Start, day care, private preschools, or early childhood programs in the public schools. These early group experiences have provided children's first encounters with daily organized instructional and social activities before kindergarten (Herman 1984).

An increase in the influence of television and family mobility on children. These two factors have produced 5-year-olds who are more knowledgable about their world and who are apparently more ready for a full-day school experience than the children of previous generations.

Renewed interest in academic preparation for later school success. Even in families without both parents working outside the home, there is great interest in the contribution of early childhood programs (including full-day kindergarten) to later school success.

Schools and Full-Day Kindergarten

School systems have become interested in alternative scheduling for kindergarten partly because of the reasons listed above and partly for reasons related to finances and school space availability. Some of these reasons concern

State school funding formulas. Some states provide more state aid for all-day students, although seldom enough to completely pay the extra costs of full-day kindergarten programs. Other states allow only half-day aid; in these states, funding formulas would have to change in order for schools to benefit financially from all-day kindergarten attendance.

Busing and other transportation costs. Eliminating the need for noon bus trips and crossing guards saves the school system money.

Availability of classroom space and teachers. As school enrollment declines, some districts find that they have extra classroom space and qualified teachers available to offer full-day kindergarten.

In addition, school districts are interested in responding to parents' requests for full-day kindergarten. In New York City, for example, parents who were offered the option of full-day kindergarten responded overwhelmingly in favor of the plan ("Woes Plague New York's All-Day Kindergartens" 1983).

Advantages of Full-Day Programs

Herman (1984) describes in detail the advantages of full-day kindergarten. He and others believe full-day programs provide a relaxed, unhurried school day with more time for a variety of experiences, greater opportunity for screening and assessment to detect and deal with potential learning problems, and more occasions for good quality interaction between adults and students.

While the long term effects of full-day kindergarten are yet to be determined, Thomas Stinard's (1982) review of 10 research studies comparing half-day and full-day

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kindergarten indicates that students taking part in full-day programs demonstrate strong academic advantages as much as a year after the kindergarten experience. Stinard found that full-day students performed at least as well as half-day students in every study (and better in many studies) with no significant adverse effects.

A recent longitudinal study of full-day kindergarten in the Evansville-Vanderburgh, Ohio, School District indicates that fourth graders maintained the academic advantage gained during full-day kindergarten (Humphrey 1983).

Despite often-expressed fears that full-day kindergartners would experience fatigue and stress, school districts that have taken care to plan a developmentally appropriate, nonacademic curriculum with carefully paced activities have reported few problems (Evans and Marken 1983; Stinard 1982).

Disadvantages of Full-Day Programs

Critics of full-day kindergarten point out that such programs are expensive because they require additional teaching staff and aides to maintain an acceptable child-adult ratio. These costs may or may not be offset by transportation savings and, in some cases, additional state aid.

Other requirements of full-day kindergarten, including more classroom space, may be difficult to satisfy in districts where kindergarten or primary grade enrollment is increasing and/or where school buildings have been sold.

In addition to citing added expense and space requirements as problems, those in disagreement claim that full-day programs may become too academic, concentrating on basic skills before children are ready for them. In addition, they are concerned that half of the day's programming in an all-day kindergarten setting may become merely child care.

Advantages of Half-Day Programs

Many educators still prefer half-day, everyday kindergarten. They argue that a half-day program can provide high quality educational and social experience for young children while orienting them adequately to school.

Specifically, half-day programs are viewed as providing continuity and systematic experience with less probability of stress than full-day programs. Proponents of the half-day approach believe that, given the 5-year-old's attention span, level of interest, and home ties, a half day offers ample time in school and allows more time for the young child to play and interact with adults and other children in less-structured home or child care settings (Finkelstein 1983).

Disadvantages of Half-Day Programs

Disadvantages of half-day programs include midday disruption for children who move from one program to another and, if busing is not provided by the school, difficulty for parents in making transportation arrangements. Even if busing is provided and the child spends the other half day at home, schools may find providing the extra trip expensive. In addition, the half-day kindergartner may have little opportunity to benefit from activities such as assemblies or field trips.

Conclusion

While both full-day and half-day programs have advantages and disadvantages, it is worth noting that length of the school day is only one dimension of the kindergarten experience. Other important issues include the nature of the kindergarten curriculum and the quality of teaching. In general, research suggests that, as long as the curriculum is developmentally appropriate and intellectually stimulating, either type of scheduling can provide an adequate introduction to school.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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